Feng Xiao

SOME NOTES ON THE BEGINNINGS OF MAY DAY IN CHINA

This article of the Chinese historian Feng Xiao gives an account of the first political mass demonstrations held on May Day in China. Those celebrations were strictly connected with the May 4 th Movement of 1919 and with the repercussions of the October Revolution in the National Liberation Movements of the Far East. However, these are not the first signs of the presence of May Day in China: see, for example, the references to the meetings held in Shanghai on the First of May 1913 by some organizations of socialist or semi-anarchist character, as the *Zhong-guo Shi-hui-dang* (Socialist party of China) and the *Chun-cui Shi-hui-dang* (Pure Socialist Party), in the essay of Martin Bernal, *Chine: le socialisme avant 1915*, in G. Haupt-M. Rebérioux (Eds.), *La Deuxième Internationale et l'Orient*, Paris, 1967, p. 316.

The Declaration of the labourers of Beijng on May Day 1920 — translated by Feng Xiao and here given as an appendix to her article — can be considered the first document coming out of a May Day mass meeting in China, together with the Address to the Soviet Governement of Russia approved at the Shanghai mass demonstration on the same May Day. The latter was published as *Réponse au manifeste du governement ouvrier et paysan de Russie, adoptée au cours de la manifestation du Ier mai 1920 à Changhai*, in Jean Chesnaux, *Les syndicats chinois 1919-1927*, Paris-la Haye, 1965, pp. 102-104.

May Day is a day which is known to everyone. In 1886, the workers of Chicago made it a special time to hold a General Strike for the Eight-Hour question. Since then, May Day has become a sacred day in the labour circle of the USA and Europe.

But when did China begin May Day commeration? Its starting point can be traced back to 8 years ago.

The Chinese workers appeared for the first time on the political stage as an independent factor during the development of the May

4th movement in 1919. Since then, they have worked in concert with the working movements of the world. Strengthened day by day, they proved to be a fresh troop in the democratic revolution of China.

In 1920, the first May Day celebrations were held in Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Jujiang and Tangshan In these cities, masses striked and paraded for the Eight-Hour question and protested against the imperialistic domination in China.

The workers' movement started from two places: one was Changxindian Railway Department (in Beijing); another was Xiaoshadu (in Shanghai).

On May Ist 1921, a workers' demonstration broke out in Changxindian. It was the grandest parade that had ever been held. More than one thousand people took part in the demonstration. Workers decided to set up a labour union and named it «workers' club» In the early period of the labour movement, this name was used by many labour unions in different areas of the country (except Guangzhou).

Xiaoshadu was an area where many cotton mills were cetralized. A workers' movement also began there and a night school was opened for the labourers. The impact was not as good as in Changxindian, but it had still some significance.

Since 1920, some labour journals were printed. For example: «The Labourer» (published in Shanghai), «The Voice of Workers» (published in Beijing), «The Sound of Workers» (published in Guangzhou), «Workers' Weekly Magazine» (published in Beijing), etc. These journals gave great importance to local and foreign questions concerning the workers' movement. Also, they spoke up for organizing Trade Unions. Indeed, these journals broadened the horizons of workers in China. Thereby, the Chinese Working Movement became a part of the Working Movement of the world.

At an early stage of the workers' movement, the three National Working Congresses — that were held respectively in 1922, in 1925, and in 1926 — were worth attending. The three meetings were all held in Guangzhou.

The first National Working Congress was held on May Day 1922. In the morning, all the deputies of the meeting and tens of thousands of workers attended a demonstration. The meeting was opened at First Park of Guangzhou. It approved 9 resolutions, which included the Eight-Hour question and the labour legislation, the Resolution of supporting strikes, etc.

In 1925, the second working congress was held in Guangzhou

again. On May Ist, a great parade was attended by more than one hundred thousand people. Among them, there were not only workers, but also peasants, students and soldiers. It was the first time in the history of China that a demonstration with so wide an attendance was held. The deputies firmly believed that only when united, the common people could overthrow the warlords, international imperialism, and could also free all working masses.

On May 1st 1926, the 3rd working meeting was summoned. Besides the deputies of the Trade Unions, Germany, there were deputies who came from Great Britain, France, Japan, USA and Soviet Union. In this meeting, the delegates of many circles spoke in succesion. The Conference passed a cable to be sent to all workers' circles of the country and to the workers all over the world.

In the meantime, the groups of various circles of Guagzhou, about three hundred thousand people, called for a May Day memorial meeting at Dongxiaochang. In Chongqing, Hangzhou, Tianjing, Shanghai, Gueiling, there were some memorial activities too. Some of these meetings had to be held in secret, because of authorities' repression.

After the political events of 1927, a period of low tide began for the Chinese working movement. The best part of memorial activities of May Day were held secretly.

THE DECLARATION OF THE LABOURERS OF BEIJING ON MAY DAY (MAY DAY LEAFLET IN 1920)

Our dearest labour friends! Today is May Day. It commemorates the day when the American Federation of Labor striked and gained the «Eight Hours a Day». Workers all over the world, on this day, are striking successfully and are holding demonstrations. But in our country, there are still very few workers who know something about today. For this reason, we will tell everybody the following words: From today, everybody will work; everybody will have meals. We must drive out all the men who have meals and who do not physically work — the bureaucrats, politicians, capitalists, pastors, monks and nuns, taoists, burglars, beggars, prostitutes and the herds-men. We do not allow them to stay in our society to exploit us. So, let us unite in taking back all the land, gardens, factories, machines and materials. Let's take them in our hands. Then, who dares oppress us again? Our labour friends! Take an action at once! Be on holiday today, and let us have a great celebration for May Day!

Long Live May Day!
Long Live Labourers!

Translated by Feng Xiao. First published in *Gong yun shi yanjiu* (Historical Researches on Labour Movement), the historical journal of the Central Unions in Peking, N.1., 1987. The original paper is kept in the Historical Archives Department of Nanking.

五月一日北京劳工宣言

我们敬爱的劳工朋友呵！今天是五月一日，是美国工党同盟罢工争得“每天八小时”的纪念日，全球的工人到了这一天，都是相率罢工，举行示威运动。但是我国的工人，还有很多不知道今天是什么日子。所以我们来告诉各位：自从今天起，有工大家做，有饭大家吃，凡不做工而吃饭的官僚、政客、资本家、牧师、僧尼、道士、盗贼、乞丐、娼妓、牧民，一律驱逐，不准他留在我们的社会里来剥削我们，所以我们大家都要联络起来，把所有一切的土地、田园、工厂、机器、物料通通取回在我们的手里。这时候，谁还敢来压制我们呢？我们的劳工朋友呵！快快起来，休业一天，大大的庆祝一下！

五月一日万岁！

劳工万岁！

（1920年五一节的传单，原件存南京史料整理处，转自《中国工运史料》1979年总字第9号）